

Tough Love

Exodus 20:1-17

John 2: 13-22

March 3, 2024

Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

Exodus 20:1-17

Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

John 2: 13-22

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

--

"I hate you. You never let me do anything! It's not fair! Thirteen year old me screamed this as I slammed my bedroom door shut, furious with my parents that I could not go to a sleepover at my friend's house. As I remember this moment—how angry and loud and stubborn-I was—how incredibly wrong I knew my parents to be—I have no sense now of why their answer was no. In the original moment it was definitely seen as mean, unfair and stupid. Now

decades later with the eyes and maturity and wisdom of a parent and a grandparent I would say their ‘no’ was right, appropriate, and justified. But to 13 me, definitely not a chance of that.

“I hate you. You never let me do anything! It’s not fair! Everyone else is going! You don’t love me! 30 years later I was the recipient of the same angry words and door slamming and sulking I had long ago given to my parents.

Whether you are receiving or giving tough love---the act of treating a person sternly, firmly, with the intent to help them in the long run--tough love can be painful, when it is done right. The ‘tough’ comes from a place of care, of concern, of wisdom, of affection, although ‘love’ most certainly feels trampled in the process. The message of “I always love you, but sometimes not your behavior,” gets lost in the fury and tears of the moment.

For love to be love it cannot always be sweet, tender and sentimental. Real love must be knee deep in the challenges with clear boundaries and natural consequences, even when this love is seen as anything but. As writer Randi Fine says, “When we don’t allow others to suffer the consequences of their actions we cripple them emotionally. We deprive them of the ability to learn from their mistakes. We also take away their ability to overcome their problems and change their life for the better.”ⁱ

It is indeed a harsh challenge to watch our children, to watch anyone we love, struggle and suffer to grow, to not just step in and smooth the way for them, but by doing so we would make only the moment easier and deprive them of the chance to learn, to practice, essential life skills. Tough love is often necessary because as our human nature we have a tendency not to respond to gentle taps on the shoulder.

The tough love that comes with being a good parent, is also the way of God, our eternal Parent.

The commandments given to Moses on Mt Sinai were instructions for living into the ways of God, into a right relationship and covenant with God, for a people who had lived in slavery and now finally knew freedom. Now God had given them boundaries of ethics, worship, and right or wrong with clear rewards or clear consequences. God’s message to the people is this: “You are My people. You are called to a life that reflects who I am.”

In the midst of God’s strict sounding shall’s and shall not’s, it is unmistakable how passionately God cares for the people and how much God’s desire to have a relationship with them. These aren’t just the house rules of a stern parent, they are the terms of relationship for God’s people who are loved and cared for by their Creator. It’s almost as though God is saying, “Look, I know what will make you miserable, and here are ten things to avoid that will keep you from misery.”ⁱⁱ God’s commandments reflect the character of God for the people to follow.

- You shall have no other gods before me because I am the One God. There are no others, do not seek nor create them.
- You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, because that is slander.
- Remember the sabbath day because God rested and expects the same from God’s people.
- Honor your father and your mother because they are God’s hands and heart in your life.
- You shall not murder because life is a gift from God.
- You shall not commit adultery, because God is faithful.
- You shall not steal, because God can be trusted.
- You shall not bear false witness because God only speaks the truth.
- You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor, because God is content with God’s own self.

Fast forward more than 1400 years from the giving of the Ten Commandments and the approximately 613 laws that have come from them. The laws have governed the people for generations by providing wise, moral and healthy ways of living, as well as guidance in proper worship.

Jesus is in Jerusalem and he too has a tough love experience with God's people in the Temple. The same laws created for right living could be twisted or misused so that the letter of the law was so rigid, and even abused, meaning that the spirit of the law was gone.

By the time of Jesus' ministry, a whole system had been put in place to uphold the Law and help people who broke it find a way back to a right relationship with God. The faithful loved God's law, recited it and its purpose night and day. A sacrificial system had been developed so people could offer the proper sacrifice at the Temple to have their relationship with God restored.

Part of that sacrifice involved purchasing ritually clean animals. Since Roman currency was considered idolatrous because it was stamped with the image of Caesar, one had to exchange Roman currency for Temple money to purchase the sacrificial offerings. That exchange happened on the Temple steps.

Jesus saw this practice for what it was: an unnecessary barrier between God and the children of God. He saw the poor having to borrow money in order to purchase the animals of sacrifice. He heard the arguing and fretting over whether the moneychangers were charging a fair exchange. And he'd had enough. He singled out a table or two, and drove out the dove sellers and the money changers.ⁱⁱⁱ

This was Jesus' tough love, his bold act of abruptly naming the unjust and misguided practice and stopping it instantly. His actions, lesson and the consequences were clear and immediate.

In this season of Lent, this season of repentance, renewal and reflection, I invite you to look at the ways tough love has been a part of your faith journey through the redirection of the lessons first set out on stone tablets on Mt. Sinai, as well as the sudden, caught-off-guard experiences that called you back from the wrong path, even if we stomped our feet and slammed a door or two on the way. Amen.

ⁱ Randi G. Fine ~ <https://sayingimages.com/tough-love-quotes/>

ⁱⁱ Ben E. Helmer ~ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/the-giving-of-the-ten-lent-3-b-2006/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.